

21st Century Department Case Study

Location

Southridge High School
9625 S.W. 125th Avenue
Beaverton, OR 97008

Contact

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Setting: Suburban

Size: 1,950 students

Student mix: 7 percent enrolled in the free and reduced-price lunch program, 4.6 percent receiving English as a Second Language services, and 11 percent receiving Special Education services.

Introduction

Southridge High School is profiled on NWREL's Web site as part of NWREL's Schools Making Progress Series. The series highlights the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities grantees that are making considerable progress toward attaining the benefits of smaller learning communities. Schools receive technical assistance from regional centers coordinated nationally by NWREL.

We chose to highlight Southridge for this *By Request* because of the school faculty's emphasis on creating professional learning communities using Critical Friends Groups, a program developed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. CFGs provide staff a safe, structured setting of mutual support and honest feedback from trusted peers to work on student learning strategies. In 2002 Southridge was recognized as an Exemplary Smaller Learning Communities Project site by the U.S. Department of Education.

By Request authors thank Sarah Boly for her insights, and Bruce Miller for graciously allowing us to adapt parts of his Schools Making Progress profile. To read the entire profile, visit the Schools Making Progress Series site at www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/descriptions/index.asp

Background

Southridge High School is the newest of five high schools in Beaverton, the third largest school district in Oregon. From its architecture to its modes of communication, the school is designed to promote learning, a sense of community, and shared decision making. This emphasis on relationships among school staff members, students, parents, and community members was central to the design and planning of the new high school, a project led by Principal Sarah Boly.

In 1997, Boly formed a planning team of 18 teachers and counselors from across the district who spent a year researching design concepts that explored aspects of school culture, organization, and curriculum and instruction. The school sought prospective employees who shared this commitment and were willing to tolerate ambiguity as practices were developed and implemented in the school's first years of operation. All employees were hired through a review and screening process involving students, parents, and community members.

The invitation letter to faculty members to be on the planning committee emphasized the active participation of all planning group members. Team members, the letter said, "would have the responsibility for conceptualization of learning communities within the school, for the development of a coherent curriculum and have the primary responsibility for the implementation of a substantive professional development program that ensures all staff are prepared to meet their new roles and responsibilities and for the support of school governance and leadership structures."

The planning committee worked closely with the community in the planning process. Through surveys, phone interviews, focus groups, and numerous forums with students, families, and members of the business community and community groups, the following priorities were identified and underlie the core values of the school:

- Personalized learning
- Real-world application of knowledge through contextual learning
- Professional learning communities to promote shared decision making and continuous learning
- Democratic decision making
- Community engagement

After reviewing research findings, attending conferences, visiting schools, and reflecting on how to incorporate the community's goals in a school design, the planning team developed a framework of shared leadership that included strategies, ideas, and programs. Southridge opened in 1999 with shared decision making and mentoring relationships as essential features of life. This is evident in nearly every aspect of its structure and practices, as described below.

Neighborhoods. Four neighborhoods bring together a cohort of teachers and school staff members with about 475 students. Students are assigned to each neighborhood in heterogeneous groups. Each neighborhood has its own identity and governance structure and functions as a "smaller learning community" under the direction of its neighborhood faculty. Each faculty cohort includes ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade interdisciplinary

teams, a counselor, an administrator, and classified support staff. Teachers in teams share responsibility for the curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and sometimes scheduling, and have a shared planning time at the ninth- and tenth-grade levels. Students stay within their assigned neighborhood for all three years of teaming although they may take electives outside their neighborhood. These teams build a sense of community, and help ensure that all students are known well by their teachers who understand their specific learning needs. This enables students to learn more and meet increasingly higher standards.

Advisory program. Teacher advisory programs are at the heart of smaller learning communities. One teacher is assigned to advise 20-25 students during the course of their high school careers, ensuring personalized attention to students' needs. Advisory periods are scheduled each month to deliver a wide range of academic advisement functions such as assisting students to manage their academic plan and profile (MAPP), plan a course of study, assist with career academy contracts, and assist with the management of state testing completion and work sample collection. The advisory periods also help solve school culture issues through the student/ staff action democratic process, and serve as a vehicle for accomplishing student-developed diversity awareness and appreciation agendas.

Skytime. During a 45-minute period twice a week, students can choose to meet with teachers or counselors, complete laboratory activities, or work on projects. The Skytime teacher is also the student's adviser and the student will stay in that mentoring relationship for as long as the student remains at Southridge. This helps ensure that every student is known well by a caring adult in the school.

Link Crew. A transition program for ninth-graders in which 12th-grade students serve as mentors.

Trimester schedule. A trimester schedule makes it possible to offer students more options, more instructional time, while promoting a depth of learning. The district requires students to take 23 credits to graduate; however, Southridge students can take 28 credits, which results in acceleration of learning in many areas.

Depth of learning. All students are required to take advanced study in a career academy (focus area) or be an International Baccalaureate Diploma Candidate to graduate. During their junior or senior year, students will take up to 15 additional courses (some at Portland Community College), and complete career-related learning experiences, 60 hours of service learning, and a senior exhibit, all of which must be tied to their focus area in order to earn an endorsement (Certificate of Advanced Mastery). A commitment to interdisciplinary team teaching, contextual learning, and personalized support for all students supports this priority.

Career academies. Career academies foster mentoring relationships between students and professionals in the community. As sophomores, students choose one to three career academy endorsements to follow in their junior and senior years from the areas of science; information technology; business leadership; engineering and design; social, human, and government services; health and related services; and arts and communication.

Demonstrated student learning through exhibition. Students show what they know and

can do through such things as senior projects and portfolios.

Critical Friends Groups Focus on Building Trust to Facilitate Collaboration

Because staff members were selected for their willingness to participate in a collaborative school community, there wasn't much worry about staff members being resistant to new ideas. However, bringing a group of teachers and administrators together who had never worked together before had its own share of challenges, says Boly.

Unlike established schools, no one in this group had worked together before, and therefore trust was not necessarily "a given." Regardless of age or experience, most of the teachers were new to team teaching and collaborative decision making processes. Boly frankly admits that even with one year of planning, it was a "chaotic" opening year and she could see that something needed to be done to enable staff members to rise above destructive communication patterns that came from a sense of helplessness and fear. "We had all of these wonderful smaller learning communities in place, but we didn't have staff-to-staff relationships built upon trust. We had a very strong staff who didn't know each other. It was pretty clear that we needed more opportunities for staff to get to know each other and to engage in effective communication around effective teaching practices." Research has shown that students' emotional safety is critical for them to learn. Boly emphasizes that attention to the development of positive staff and student relationships is crucial to creating a culture of mutual trust and respect because "we can't create safe classrooms unless there is trust at every level."

Boly wanted the Southridge whole-school decision making model to be influenced and supported through the protocols being used by the Critical Friends Group Model. She believed that providing the staff with the opportunity to engage in Critical Friends Groups on a regular basis would provide teachers with the emotional safety necessary to holding honest discussions about student work and personal teaching practices. Boly believes that this would in turn, influence the quality of whole-school decision making. In 2001 Southridge applied for and received a U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Community Center grant that enabled the school to use the Critical Friends Group model.

Nearly 90 percent of the full-time staff at Southridge participate as members of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). These professional learning communities focus on the intimacy and vulnerability of teacher practice, helping to build relationships of trust that allow the privacy of practice to emerge into the public light of collegial examination. In each neighborhood, two staff members serve as CFG coaches, facilitating the activities and modeling trust-building behaviors and such protocols as peer observation and feedback. Each CFG consists of about eight staff members, including classified staff who meet once a month. Learning CFG protocols, or codes of behavior, has provided staff members with a common language and understanding for coaching and modeling trust-building behaviors, problem solving, giving supportive feedback, and engaging in reflective dialogue. As a result, these protocols have been woven into daily activities at Southridge. Critical Friends Groups have been a crucial strategy at Southridge because the school's goals and visions for learning require that all

teachers engage in intense collaborative work.

Shared Decision Making

The Critical Friends Groups have enabled a shared decision making process to develop more effectively. Following the lead of planning team members, the entire school staff adopted a shared decision making process that included five action steps:

1. Key issues or problems are identified
2. The staff votes (or reaches consensus) to investigate the issue further
3. An action task force or committee is convened to develop a proposal for action
4. All stakeholders are consulted regarding a draft proposal and are given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and provide both warm and cool feedback
5. The proposal is submitted to the staff for a vote or consensus to adopt or reject the proposal

In all group meetings, staff members use a consensus strategy called the "five-finger vote" and protocols associated with the CFG model for structuring discussions. In a fivefinger vote, individuals show the degree of their approval with a show of fingers—five being the highest level of approval and one being the lowest. A closed fist indicates unwillingness to accept the proposal as written and a desire to present a new alternative. At the time a proposal is submitted, staff members and students can ask clarifying and probing questions, and offer warm (positive) and cool (negative) feedback, in that order.

To support shared decision making and ensure that neighborhoods are integrated into the larger context of the whole school, staff members unanimously approved a governance model that includes many committees representing all school community members, including a site council consisting of parents, school staff members, and community members. It serves as school-community liaison on matters of school reform, improvement, and fiscal management of grants.

Results

The dropout rate for the 2001–2002 school year was 3.2 percent, one of the lowest in the state; for the 2002–2003 year, the rate dropped to 1.3 percent from an anticipated 5.8 percent. State assessment results have shown gains in all areas (e.g., in 2003, 77 percent of students met or exceeded standards, up from 45 percent the previous year). Southridge has met Adequate Yearly Progress standards in 60 areas, including Hispanic, African American, IEP, and ELL students. Southridge was named an Exemplary Smaller Learning Communities site by the U.S. Department of Education and has been recognized throughout Oregon for its accomplishments in developing smaller learning communities.

Conclusion

Boly has noticed quite a change from the first year with the Critical Friends Groups having been implemented for three years. One is that staff members feel comfortable laying their issues on the table where they can be discussed. "They can say openly, I feel disrespected," says Boly. "This is how trust is built."

Critical Friends has empowered teachers to make decisions on their own. Vice Principal Amy Gordon reflects, "Empowering people fosters a sense of ownership. Sometimes I hear something I don't want to hear, but the process keeps everyone honest there is a lot of communication, which is the key."

One might be tempted to dismiss Southridge's accomplishments because the school serves a highly educated community, was designed "from the ground up" with strong community and district support, and staff members were hired based on their common vision of schooling. True, these conditions greatly facilitated success at Southridge, but they are not sufficient. Most important is a leadership approach that empowers others to share in decision making. This is no easy task, of course, but Southridge's path to success can be instructive for other schools seeking to implement smaller learning communities for students and staff members.

Students consistently report in focus groups that Southridge is a positive environment where, according to one pupil, "The power to impact school action, thus the community, has allowed me to express my interests and make a difference." This sentiment is shared by staff and community members, and it was earned through hard work and an abiding vision and expectation about what people can accomplish when they are empowered to make decisions.

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